THE Princess Virginia

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE prince came forward. "What a delightful surprise!" he said. "How good of you both to look me up! But I wish my prophetic soul had warned me to keep back dinner. We have just reached the third course." And his eyes met the chancellor's.

"All the same," he went on, "I beg that you will honor me by dining. Everything can be ready in a moment, and the bisque ecrevisso"—

"Thank you," cut in the emperor. "We cannot dine." His voice came hoarsely, as if a fierce hand pinched his throat. "Our call is purely one of business and a moment will see it finished. We owe you an explanation for this intrusion." He paused. All his calculations were upset by the chancellor's triumph, for to plan beforehand what he should do if he found Helen Mowbray dining here alone with the prince would have been to insult her. His campaign had been arranged in the event of the chancellor's defeat.

Now the one course he saw open before him was frankness.

To look at the girl and meet guilt or defiance in her eyes would be agony; therefore he would not look, though he saw her, and her alone, as he stood gazing with a strained fixedness at the prince.

He knew that she had risen not in frightened haste, but with a leisured and dainty dignity. Now her face was turned to him. He felt it as a blind man may feel the rising of the sun.

He wished that she had died before this moment; that they had both died last night in the garden while he held her in his arms and their hearts beat together. She had told him then that she loved him, yet she was here with this man—here of her own free will, the same girl he had worshiped as a goddess in the white moonlight twenty-four hours ago.

The thought was hot in his heart as the searing touch of iron red from the fire—the same girl!

His blood sang in his ears a song of death, and for an instant all was black around him. He groped in black chaos where there was neither light nor hope, and dully he was conscious of the chancellor's voice saying, "Your majesty, if you are satisfied, would you not rather go?"

Then the dark spell broke. Light showered over him as from a golden fountain, for in spite of himself he had met the girl's eyes—the same eyes, because she was the same girl—sweet eyes, pure and innocent and wistfully appealing.

"My God!" he cried. "Tell me why you are here, and whatever you may say I will believe you, in spite of all and through all, because you are you, and I know that you can do no wrong."

"Your majesty!" exclaimed the chancellor. But the emperor did not hear. With a broken exclamation that was half a sob the girl held out both her hands, and Leopold sprang forward to crush them between his ice cold palms.

"Thank heaven!" she faltered. "You are true! You've stood the test. I love you."

"At last, then, I can introduce you to my sister Virginia," said the crown prince of Hungaria, with a great sigh of relief for the ending of his difficult part.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THEY were alone together. Adalbert and Count von Breitstein had stolen from the room and had ceased to exist so far as Leopold and Virginia were concerned.

"I'll tell you now why I'm here and everything else," she was saying, but the emperor stopped her.

"Ever since I came to myself I wanted no explanation," he said. "I wanted only you. That is all I want now. I am the happiest man in the universe. Why should I ask how I came by my happiness? Virginia! Virginia! It's a more beautiful name even than Helen."

"But listen," she pleaded. "There are some things—just a few things—that I long to tell you. Please let me. Last night I wished to go into a convent. Oh, it was because I loved you so much! I wanted you to seem perfect as my hero of romance, just as you were already perfect as an emperor. To think that I should have been far away out of Rhaetia by this time if Miss Portman hadn't been ill! Dear Miss Portman! Maybe if we'd gone nothing would ever have come right. Who can say?

"You know, my brother came to our hotel this afternoon. When his card arrived we couldn't tell whether he knew our secret or not, but when we had let him come up we had only to see his face of surprise. He was angry, too, as well as surprised, for he blurted out that there were all sorts of horrid suspicions against us, and mother explained everything to him before I could have stopped her even if I would—how I had not wanted to accept you unless you could learn to love me for myself and then how I had been disappointed. No, don't speak; that's all over now. You've more than atoned, a thousand times more.

"Dal explained things, too, then—very different things—about a plan of the chancellor's to disgust you with me and how he (Dal) had played into the chancellor's hands because, you see, he thought he was acting wisely for his neglected sister's sake and because he had really supposed an actress he knows was masquerading as Miss Mowbray. Very imprudently he'd told her that some day there might be something between you and his sister. She knew quite well, too, that the real Mowbrays were our cousins; so, you see, as she and he have quarreled, it might have been an easy and clever way for an unscrupulous woman to take revenge. Dal would have gone and perhaps have said dreadful things to the chancellor, who was waiting downstairs for news, but I begged him not. From being the saddest girl in the world I'd suddenly become the happiest, for the chancellor had told Dal and Dal had told me that you had followed Helen Mowbray to ask her to be the empress. That changed everything, for then I knew you really loved her, but just to punish you for what I suffered through you last night I longed to put you to one more test. I said: 'Let the chancellor carry out his plot. Let me go with you to your hunting lodge.' At first Dal wouldn't consent, but when I begged him he did, for generally I can get my way with people, I warn you.

"That's all, except that I hadn't realized how severe the test would be until you came in and I saw the look in your eyes. It was a dagger of ice in my heart. I prayed heaven to make you believe in me without a word. Oh, how I prayed through all that dreadful moment and how I looked at you, saying with my eyes, 'I love you; I am true!' If you had failed me then it would have killed me, but"—

"There could be no but," the emperor broke in. "To doubt is not to love. When a man loves he knows. Even out of darkness a light comes and tells him."

"Then you forgive me—for tonight, and for everything, from the beginning?"

"Forgive you?"

"And if I'd been different, more like other girls, content with a conventional affection, you wouldn't have loved me more?"

He took her in his arms and held her as if he would never let her go.

"If you had been different I wouldn't have loved you at all," he said. "But if things had been different I couldn't have helped loving you just the same. I should have been fated to fall in love with Princess Virginia of Baumenburg-Drippe at first sight, exactly as I fell in love with Helen Mowbray."

"Ah, but at best you'd have fallen in love with Virginia because it was your duty, and you fell in love with Helen Mowbray because it was your duty not to, which makes it so much nicer."

"We shall never be old."

"It was no question of duty, but of destiny," said the emperor. "The stars ordained that I should love you."

"Then I wish," and Virginia laughed happily, as she could afford to laugh now, "that the stars had told me last summer. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble. And yet I don't know," she added thoughtfully. "It's been a wonderful adventure. We shall often talk of it when we're old."

"We shall never be old, for we love each other," said the emperor.

THE END.

Mary and Matrimony.

By Cecilia A. Loizeaux.

"I KNOW just how you feel, Dick, but I don't see how it can be helped. When I became engaged to you we agreed that it would have to be a long engagement."

"It's been three years now, Mary, and I call that a long time. And you seem to have no idea of ending the wait at all. You—you aren't forgetting to care, are you, Mary?"

Mary's lip trembled as she looked at him.

"I care as much—more—than ever," she said. "You don't understand. You see, I have been papa's housekeeper since I was fifteen, and I simply can't leave him alone."

"He is perfectly willing, Mary. Sometimes I think he is anxious for you to marry. He doesn't want to feel as if he were in the way of your happiness."

"That's just it!" cried Mary. "Dear old dad! He'd sacrifice his own interests for me any day. I won't have it."

"Mary, how old is your father?"

"Fifty."

"And healthy?"

"Perfectly. We're all proud of our health."

"He's likely to live out his threescore and ten then."

"I hope so, and if you mean that you wish he would die, Dick Lane"—

"Easy, Mary; easy. Personally I'm very fond of your father. That's one reason why I am so anxious to get into his immediate family. But, let's see, unless some unforeseen accident occurs I shall be obliged to wait for you at least twenty-five years." He held up a warning hand as Mary started to speak. "Don't you see that we're no nearer the goal than we were three years ago? Don't wait to find a solution of the problem, dear. Marry me now and we'll solve it together."

Mary rose impatiently.

"What's the use of talking that way? You know I can't. I've thought and thought, but there doesn't seem to be any other way out. Father flatly refuses to live with us—says it's better not—and I can't leave him. That's why I sent for you. I've made up my mind that it isn't fair to keep you waiting, so I am going to break our engagement." She looked at him bravely, though her eyes swam with tears and her chin quivered.

Dick stared a moment and then began to laugh, which, under the circumstances, was the worst thing he could have done. Mary's eyes began to blaze, and the tears disappeared.

"It's a joke, is it?" she blazed. "Well, it's time it was broken. Here is your ring. I'm sorry for your wasted time, and, since you are so anxious to be married, I hope you will find some one who will have you right away."

She slipped from the room, and not until he heard the door of her room slam did Dick recover from his amazement. Then he laughed again and, putting the ring in his pocket, left the house.

"Poor little Mary!" he mused. "Well, I see that I'll have to get her father to help."

Mary, watching him stride up the street whistling "Mary, Mary, Long Before the Fashions Came," sank into her big chair and wept.

"He wanted it broken! He wanted it broken!" she wailed.

Once admitted to the inner office Dick took the leather chair which Mary's father indicated with his foot, accepted a cigar and lit it.

"Is this a business call or just a visit?"

"Both. I've been up to see Mary."

"Strange. Anything doing? Will Mary marry?"

"She says she won't. In fact, she has just given me back my ring. I say she must, and I want you to help me."

"Of course I can't force my daughter to marry you if she does not want to," grinned Mr. Arnold.

"Yes, you can—if you go about it right. You see"— And he briefly outlined his talk with Mary. Mr. Arnold smoked fiercely while the young man talked, and then they went over a detailed plan together.

When the young man finally left, the elder shook his hand heartily.

"I'll do my best, Dick. Mary's a good daughter, but she'll make just as good a wife, and I'll divide."

That evening Mary came to the dinner table red eyed and white faced. Little by little her father drew the story from her. When she had finished he said: "I'm glad of it, Mary. I never would have asked you to give him up, but I am thankful that you can see for yourself." He did not say what she could see. "And now that it's all over I don't mind telling you that there are as good fish in the sea as have been caught so far. Now, Dick—well, he's so slow! And then—But that's over now, so cheer up, daughter, and fall in love with some one else."

"Oh, I can't ever do that!" wept Mary. "I shall take care of you all my life."

"Tut! Tut! Just put your mind to it and you can do it. I am anxious to see you marry and be happily settled, Mary. Of course I didn't say so, because I could see that you didn't really care for Dick. If you had cared you'd have married him two years ago. But now that he's gone"—

Mary gasped and stooped for her napkin, sitting up again with a red face. Not care for Dick! Perhaps Dick thought that too.

"And, aside from that," went on her father, "I have been engaged to Marian Howard for a year, and I know how you will feel about keeping me waiting too long. Of course I should not think of marrying again while you are with me."

Mary thought she must faint. The room went round and round, and then she heard a voice, which must have been her own, stiffly congratulating her father, heard him say something the words of which she could not distinguish, and then she was up in her own room.

"Oh," she moaned, "what shall I do? No one wants me. Papa is going to marry again, and even he thinks I do not care for Dick. I must have acted terribly for papa to think that. And why didn't he tell me that he wanted to marry? I'd have been glad of it, for then I could have married Dick and would not have needed to worry about papa at all. Oh, it is cruel! And now it is too late. No wonder Dick stopped caring if I acted like that—like they seem to think I have." She sobbed miserably.

"I like Marian Howard. I have always wished I could have her with me. I'd like to live with them, but they don't want me either. Papa has said time and again that such combinations are always unhappy, and so I must go away somewhere."

She sobbed herself to sleep that night after hours of wretched reflection and almost desperate thinking. She did not go down to breakfast, but when she heard her father leave the house she went downtown and drew all of the money which she had in the bank. Then she bought a ticket for New York.

At noon her father, seeing how wretched she looked at dinner, felt like a brute and came very near to spoiling the whole thing. But she slipped away too quickly to give him time to commit himself, and when he was sure she was in her room he called Dick cautiously up over the phone.

"I guess you'd better come over. I've made a beastly mess of the thing," he said. Then he called up to Mary that he had to go back to the office and told her not to sit up for him and cleared out, feeling like a coward.

This was the chance for which Mary was waiting. Hurriedly she finished packing her suit case, wrote an agonized note to her father, and, after dressing herself in the long coat and dark veil which fleeing heroines always wore in the plays she had seen, she let herself quietly out at the front door and reached the car. A young man jumped off the outgoing car, looked at her sharply and then swung up the steps of the ingoing car after her, but she did not notice.

"Was this what her father had meant in his telephone message?" thought the young man. Well, he had made a mess of it.

It was raining by this time—a dreary little drizzle—and when Mary alighted at the union station she would have fallen on the slippery steps had not some one seized the suit case and caught her arm firmly. When she had regained her balance the man did not let go, but slid his grasp down to the cold, wet hand.

"Let me go! What do you mean?" she gasped, and then she knew. She began to cry.

"Mary, Mary, so contrary, come on home again," said Dick gently. "We didn't mean to go so far as this, dear, in our little plot."

"We—our plot! What do you mean? Did you and father fix all this up for a trick? And—and"— To Dick's great surprise and relief she began to laugh. He had expected tears, anger, even rage. And then he began to feel foolish.

"I guess I got just what I deserve. I was blind as a bat," she said. "When do you want me to marry you, Dick, if you can forgive me enough to want me at all? Dick, you didn't think that I had really stopped caring, did you?"

Mary's father was in the drawing room when they got home and came out into the hall to meet them. "We've been out walking," said Dick blandly.

"Yes, I see," said Mr. Arnold, ignoring the suit case and Mary's unusual apparel. "Fine night, isn't it?"

There is an elderly business man of Cleveland of whom friends tell a story amusingly illustrating his excessively methodical manner of conducting both his business and his domestic affairs. The Clevelander married a young woman living in a town not far away. On the evening of the ceremony the prospective bridegroom, being detained by an unexpected and important matter of business, missed the train he had intended to take in order that he might reach the abode of his bride at 7 o'clock, the hour set for the wedding. True to his instincts, the careful Clevelander immediately repaired to the telegraph office, from which to dispatch a message to the lady. It read: "Don't marry till I come. Howard."—Harper's Weekly.

Acting Like a Man.

The curtain had just gone down on the second act, leaving the heroine in the villain's clutches. Up in the balcony a sentimental woman burst into tears.

"Don't cry, dear," said her husband. "Remember, it's only a play. Act like a man!"

"Very well, John," said the lady, smiling through her tears. "You'll excuse me for a moment, won't you? I must run out and send a telegram."—Bohemian.

The Trouble With Carr.

"I rather like your friend," Mrs. Page said graciously after Carr had gone home. "He is good looking and agreeable, but you can't call him a brilliant conversationalist. The Lawton girls talked all round him."

"Unfortunately," replied Mr. Page, "Carr cannot talk on a subject unless he knows something about it."